

Mosque site plan gets unanimous nod

BY JOAN RAMSBERRY
Staff Writer

Newmarket Mayor Tony Van Bynen put a gag order on any personal or political views linked to an application to build a mosque on Mullock Drive.

The mayor's order didn't, however, stop an emotionally charged gathering in the town hall foyer following the meeting.

More than 300 people, including members of the Muslim community, crowded into the Newmarket council chambers to see how an application to convert a house into a mosque, complete with 50 parking spots on a four-acre lot, would be handled.

Council's committee of the whole approved the site plan application, recommending council give the mosque the green light.

Some residents, including George Cunningham, had previously expressed concerns Imam Zafar Bangash, president of the Islamic Society of York Region and mosque leader, is noted for his extreme anti-American government and anti-Israeli political views.

Mr. Van Bynen told the audience only matters related to planning would be allowed.

"You've handcuffed me," Mr. Cunningham told the mayor. "This needs to be discussed in a public meeting."

Mr. Bangash, a writer and commentator, has called the United



ZAFAR BANGASH: Imam attended council meeting to hear politicians approve a site plan agreement to build a mosque.

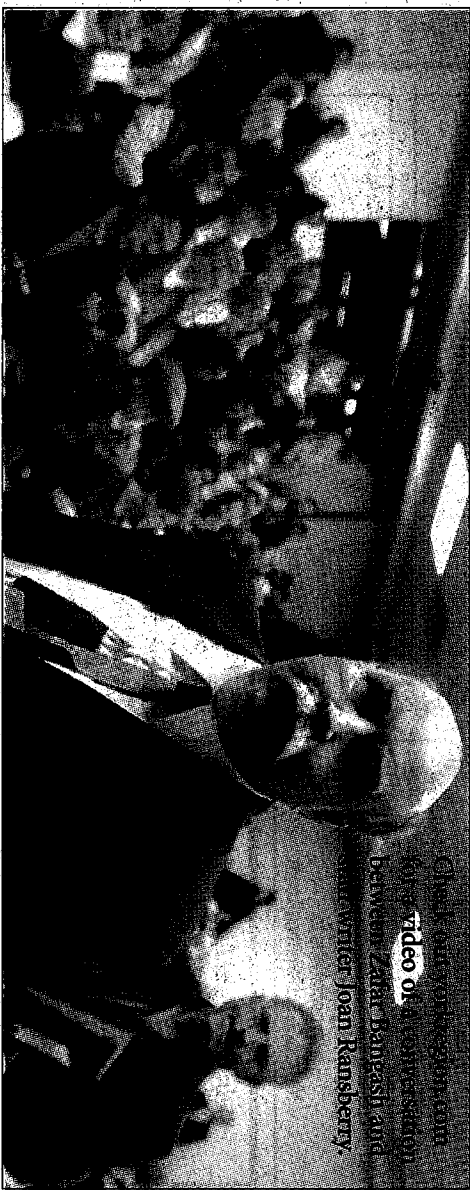
States government evil and reported Americans knew 9/11 was going to happen and did nothing to stop it.

Mr. Bangash insists his political views are separate from his mosque.

"The mosque will have nothing to do with my political views," Mr. Bangash said.

More than half of those attending the meeting came in support of the mosque. Toronto resident and Holocaust survivor Suzanne Weiss is a strong backer of Mr. Bangash.

"I go to his mosque and am made to feel very welcome," Ms. Weiss said.



An angry George Cunningham leaves council chambers after voicing strong opposition to council's decision yesterday.

"He welcomes people of all walks of life," Pastor Bob Davis of a Newmarket ecumenical group and cantor Marty Steinhouse, spiritual leader of OrHadash, questioned Mr. Bangash's connection to the mosque.

When Pastor Davis suggested Newmarket council consult the Ontario Human Rights Commission for guidance regarding this mosque, the mayor cautioned him to restrict his comments to planning matters.

"Is this particular mosque legitimate?" Mr. Davis said.

"Hate crimes may be voiced." The pastor was told he was out of order.

"That is not an issue for this council," Mr. Van Bynen said.

Councillors took turns stressing the importance of welcoming all faiths, while Councillor Dennis Ramsarran encouraged everyone to embrace diversity.

"This is about diversity, inclusiveness and compassion," Mr. Ramsarran said. "I am disappointed with the newspapers for dividing our community. I welcome this mosque."

The local Jewish community welcomes all faiths, including Muslims, Mr. Steinhouse stressed.

"But our concern is this: if Mr. Bangash preaches his political views, it may ultimately have an

effect on the children of Newmarket," he said.

Hazen Gidanny, spokesperson for the Islamic Society, said a mosque is needed within the Newmarket and area to allow Muslims to pray five times a day.

Two weeks ago, Muslims attending a prayer session at the Mullock mosque invited an Era-Banner reporter to sit in the back of an auditorium-style room while seven men prayed.

"We want a place to pray," Adel Shami of Newmarket said. "Before we could come here, I prayed at home or in Toronto."

"There are about 200 Muslim families in this area," he said.

STAFF PHOTO/BILL ROBERTS

Check out our new on-line video on a conversation between Zafar Bangash and staff writer Joan Ramsberry.